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A GENTLEMAN

BY ARTHUR C. BENSON

"How do you define a gentleman, then?" said the Lawyer, leaning forward, at a certain point of the conversation.

"The gentleman, it has been said, is a man who is never offensive unintentionally," said the Parson.

Two of the guests murmured "intentionally" by way of a correction, and the Parson smiled.

"No," he said, "a gentleman is sometimes offensive when honor and reason demand it, but then he *means* to be. The man who is not a gentleman is often offensive when he does *not* mean to be."

"But is he always a gentleman when he is intentionally offensive?" said the Lawyer.

"The gentleman is," said the Parson with a smile.

"Then," said the Lawyer, "all that your definition amounts to is that a gentleman is a man who is always a gentleman? I admit that; but it doesn't seem to get us much further!"

"No," said the Parson, "it does not get us much further; but that is because we all know a gentleman when we see him, but we cannot always predict how he will behave. I have heard a gentleman say a thing without discourtesy, which was repeated after him, word for word, by another member of the party, and it became discourteous at once. It isn't what the gentleman says or does, it is something behind—intention, attitude, manner, method. The gentleman can say a thing which would be impertinent if another person said it. I will tell you a story to illustrate that. Not very long ago it was desired to have an exhibition of pictures at Cambridge, and King Edward was asked if he would allow some of his collection to be shown. He sent for the Vice-Chancellor, who was a man of great courtesy, told him he would be very glad to lend some pictures, but

wished to know what the exact aim of the exhibition was. The Vice-Chancellor said that the intention was to give the undergraduates the opportunity of seeing some illustrative specimens of the best art, and added, 'And then, sir, we think it might keep some of them out of mischief; it might be a counter-attraction to Newmarket.' The King laughed, and said, 'Newmarket? When I was at Cambridge, I don't think any undergraduates ever thought of going *there!*' That was a piece of delightful conversational fencing, perfectly handled on both sides."

The Lawyer laughed. "Yes, I admit that was very good," he said. "Now," he went on, "I will tell you a story on the other side. There was a well-known writer of comic opera, whose temper at the rehearsals was very formidable. There was a shy chorus girl, who had to sing a bit of a solo. She was very nervous, and she dropped an aspirate or two. The author said with icy patience, 'No, we must have that again! It won't do. You don't pronounce it properly!' The girl sang it again, and it was worse than ever. The author shrugged his shoulders, and said, 'Well, we must do the best we can—I ought to remember that it takes a lady to sing my lines.' The chorus girl lost her temper and said, 'It doesn't seem to take a gentleman to write them!'"

"Bravo!" said the Parson, "that was a girl of spirit!"

"But I am afraid it was hardly an instance of Christian meekness!" said the Lawyer.

"Perhaps not," said the Parson with a smile. "But, after all, conversation is only a kind of game; it isn't a Christian characteristic, if one plays lawn-tennis, to miss all one's adversary's strokes in order that he may have the pleasure of winning."

"We are getting away from the point," said the host. "Do let us pursue the subject. Cannot any of us define a gentleman?"

"The difficulty," said the Parson, "is that the gentleman tends to be the least conspicuous person of a party; he is perfectly natural; he doesn't want to impress any one, or to shine; he is the least noticeable, for instance, in dress, neither slovenly nor over-smart; his clothes need not fit him, but they must be a part of him; they must seem absolutely appropriate, whether they are shabby or new. I am not sure that he is not the person who wants the people he is with to

be happy in their own way; and that will sometimes lead him to say a sharp thing, if any one present seems to be disposed to tyrannize,—because he must have something of the knight about him, and must be able to floor a bully, if necessary; but he must always do it good-humoredly. Do you remember what Jowett said to the man who tried to tell an improper story at his dinner-table, over the wine? He rose and said, ‘ Shall we continue this conversation in the drawing-room?’ A gentleman must have spirit and courage, not to show off, but for use, when it is wanted. He must not be wholly meek.”

“ It is an interesting question,” said the Lawyer, “ whether it is consistent for a gentleman to be a bore.”

“ It is just possible,” said the Parson. “ There are several kinds of bores. There is the bore who is so much absorbed in his own thoughts that he does not notice that other people are not interested; nor does he very much care; and there is a species of bore—the good-humored bore—who is genuinely anxious that other people should be amused, but does it clumsily; one may love a bore, even though one may dread his company.”

“ Must a gentleman be lovable?” said the host.

“ Certainly not,” said the Lawyer; “ one may have a very fine gentleman indeed, absolutely honorable, chivalrous, unpretentious, perfectly just, who is not lovable at all, who is sustained by his very pride, and even by his contempt for other people, from ever being discourteous to them; not because he owes it to them, but because he owes it to himself; he may have no sort of sympathy for other people, and demand none, but yet be perfectly courteous and kind. I am not sure, indeed, that this does not make the finest sort of gentleman.”

“ There!” said the Parson, “ that just shows how differently one uses words. That sort of man does not seem to me to be a gentleman at all. Modesty which does not stand for humility seems to me to be very nearly a kind of hypocrisy. A man of wealth and position ought to feel that he is so by a happy accident, not that it is the natural setting for his greatness. Do you remember the picturesque figure of Cluny in *Kidnapped*; the petty state he kept, his dignity, his elaborate courtesy? I always feel Cluny to have been an old snob behind it all, with his gossip about Prince Charlie, and his suspicion about affronts. Robin Oig was

just the same; he was very polite to David Balfour, because he thought that he was of some reasonable degree of nearness of kin to Balfour of Baith. But when the boy did not know anything about his family, Robin turned on his heel and muttered that he was a kinless loon that didn't know his own father. I am not sure that I do not think that pride of birth is the most ungentlemanly thing in the world."

"That isn't the current opinion," said the Lawyer.

"No," said the Parson, "but that is because in England we rank people horizontally instead of vertically. One finds gentlemen in every sort of class; and a man can be very well-born and very ill-bred, like Byron. A gentleman can be neither proud nor vain; he must meet every one with quiet, friendly, kindly dignity. You must feel absolutely sure of him, sure that he will never do a mean or a spiteful thing. I think a gentleman can hardly escape being a good man, because the essence of wickedness is injustice, and a desire to have more than your share; a gentleman must be liberal, though not profuse; he must be simple, full of good-will, with no condescension, and still less ostentation. The essence of it is an artistic kind of social justice, I believe, taking people as they are, finding one's circle ready-made; a gentleman never wants to migrate out of his class, and I don't think he can be allowed to have ambition. He must be set on making the best of life as it is, at every moment of the day; he must be always aware of the drift of other people's thoughts and moods, and he must never set his own mood against theirs. In fact I believe it is a blend of sympathy and self-possession."

"Well," said the Lawyer, "you may be right, but I confess to feeling it all rather flat. I really don't think I know any one who would consider himself a gentleman on those lines."

"You have hit it," said the Parson, "the point of the whole thing is that no gentleman ever thinks whether he is or is not one."

ARTHUR C. BENSON.